

# French organist beguiles cathedral-goers

By Peter Finney Jr.  
Clarion Herald

Organist Paul Goussot arrived in New Orleans from Paris two months ago as the first "intern" in a unique, six-month music exchange program with the Paris Conservatory, which trains some of the world's finest musicians.

It's difficult to determine what has been most impressive about the 25-year-old organ prodigy: his flying fingers on the St. Louis Cathedral organ's three keyboards, his nimble feet on the base pedals or his creative imagination that produces incredible improvisations on the fly.

"He's a magnificent musician," said Msgr. Crosby W. Kern, rector of the cathedral, who initiated the exchange program after discussing the idea with organ masters from Paris who had come to the cathedral to perform concerts in previous years. "When you talk about an intern, you immediately think of someone in training. When you get to his level, he's already an accomplished organist."

## Sacred improvisation

Goussot displayed his supreme improvisational skills last month at the conclusion of the Maritime Mass. In place of the closing hymn, a bagpipe escorted the celebrant out of the church and into Jackson Square.

"Once the bagpipe music faded away, Paul picked up on the exact theme without even seeing the music and did an incredible improvisation," said cathedral organist Dr. Alfred Lemmon.

"After the Masses he plays a postlude that the people enjoy so much they stay in the pews – they don't leave," Msgr. Kern said. "We have to watch it because the archbishop goes out to greet the people, and they're not going outside. They want to stay and hear the music. Once he starts playing, you go, 'Oooh.'"

Goussot, whose English has vastly improved in the last

two months from his interaction with the St. Louis Cathedral Choir, said he is thrilled to have been chosen for the music exchange. Goussot is among 10 organists in a five-year training program at the Paris Conservatory.

"It is the first time I go to the United States," he said, smiling. "I didn't know very well New Orleans except for the Mark Twain novel. I know Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. I didn't know New Orleans so much except for jazz. But I discover New Orleans as a wonderful place."

Goussot, who will be featured in two upcoming concerts (see box, right), began playing the piano at age 8. His father is a doctor and his mother is a painter, but while neither played an instrument, they loved to listen to music.

"I started playing the piano and I started improvising, and improvisation is one of my specialties," Goussot said. "I remember I was one time in a church, and the organist of the church gave me permission to play the organ. I was very excited. It was one of the best moments of my life."

## Mighty Mississippi calliope

His New Orleans experience has provided a few more. One of his highlights so far was meeting Debbie Fagnano, who plays the steam-powered calliope on the Steamboat Natchez. Goussot's two Paris Conservatory teachers, Olivier Latry and Michel Bouvard, who had played concerts at St. Louis Cathedral, had told Goussot about the unusual music.

"I couldn't believe," Goussot said. "Then I got here and I could hear this organ everywhere. I met Debbie, and she invited me to play the calliope. It was a beautiful day. I played the French (national anthem), 'La Marseillaise,' on the calliope. It was wonderful."

During his first two months, Goussot has played a critically acclaimed harpsichord concert with two members of the Louisiana Philharmonic



Photos by Frank J. Methé | CLARION HERALD

**Those who attend Mass the next four months at St. Louis Cathedral will enjoy the musical talents of organist Paul Goussot, a musician who is participating in a music exchange program between the cathedral and the Paris Conservatory.**

Orchestra. He will play Dec. 14 at 6 p.m. with the Cathedral Boychoir and Dec. 20 at 5:30 p.m. for the annual Cathedral Christmas Concert, featuring selections from French composer Poulenc.

He is also "practicing" his improvisational skills for a featured competition when he returns home to Paris next spring. During the next four months, Goussot will play the organ for the cathedral liturgies, give master classes for area organists and offer organ programs for schoolchildren.

## Well-fed and cared for

Cathedral music director Dreux Montegut said Goussot, who doesn't know how to cook, has been taken under the wing of several choir members and shown New Orleans hospitality. Two families had him to dinner on Thanksgiving.

"He's learned a new word – 'doggie bag,'" Lemmon said.

Msgr. Kern said the music program is in keeping with the cathedral's historic legacy of providing the best in sacred music for the New Orleans area.

"We hope Paul is the first of many who will come here," Msgr. Kern said. "We're going to talk with the Paris Conservatory about continuing this."

Goussot has used his French Quarter base to soak in the

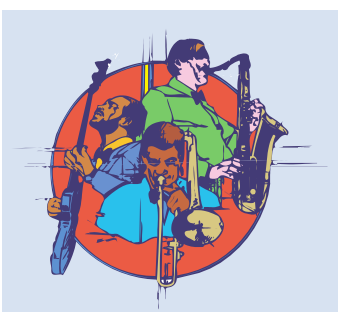
ubiquitous street music and also has visited several jazz venues around town.

"New Orleans has this very mysterious atmosphere," Goussot said. "Maybe it's because it's the first time I come here. There are a lot of musicians in the street, and these are extraordinary things for me. People are very nice in New Orleans. I've discovered they love French music. The first thing I will tell my friends and family is not about my music but about the town."

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**Goussot, a 25-year-old organ prodigy, will give master classes for organists while in New Orleans.**



## FREE CONCERTS AT ST. LOUIS CATHEDRAL

Every year in December at St. Louis Cathedral, local choirs and New Orleans artists herald Christmas with concerts of classical music, ensembles, carols and jazz music in one of the country's most historic churches.

► Dec. 10, 6 p.m., Phillip Manuel (R&B)

► Dec. 13, 6 p.m., Ellis Marsalis (Jazz)

► Dec. 14, 6 p.m., St. Louis Cathedral Boychoir (Dreux Montegut, director) and organist Paul Goussot

► Dec. 15, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church Ministry (Gospel)

► Dec. 16, John Boutte (Jazz)

► Dec. 17, 6 p.m., Ebenezer Baptist Church (Gospel)

► Dec. 20, 5:30 p.m., annual Christmas Concert; Cathedral Choir and Orchestra (director Dreux Montegut) will perform Poulenc "Gloria"; organist Paul Goussot will perform Poulenc's "Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani." Followed by caroling in Jackson Square, led by Archbishop Gregory Aymond.

## 2010

► Jan. 17, 6 p.m., St. Mary Church, Leah Chase jazz trio

► Feb. 3, 8 p.m., Louisiana Philharmonic and the Historic New Orleans Collection join forces for a classic music concert including the works of native New Orleansians who left New Orleans and achieved prominence abroad.

► March 7, 6 p.m., Yves Castagnet, titular organist of Notre Dame in Paris, will perform improvisation of organist Marcel Dupre.